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Oklahoma

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[title page]

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# COMANCHE BABY LANGUAGE

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The Comanche language[1] reveals an unusually rich and formalized vocabulary of special baby words which were used in teaching the child to speak. Their use began when the child was old enough to understand, at about one year according to informants, and dropped off as the child matured and learned the normal, adult locutions at the age of 3 to 4. If a child persisted in using these words after the age of 5 or so, it would be laughed at and ridiculed for its babyish ways. Today English holds sway and these baby words no longer function actively, although children in those families or households where there are older persons who speak only Comanche may have some knowledge of them. So of necessity these data were recorded from the lips of adult speakers, most of whom, however, maintain a lively memory of the baby forms.

The following list was checked with eight informants and is probably exhaustive. Where known, the adult form or derivation is given in brackets after the translation of the baby word or words.

ʔáʔh, ʔáx, ʔáʔhA *something nasty or dirty; feces, urine, penis, a smell; warning to get away from something dirty; I have wet, dirtied myself; command for baby to defecate.*

ʔaʔhá·ʔ *no good!* (said to baby).

The next two forms are used in speaking to and by older children. They are derived from the baby words, but with regular verbal suffixes.

ʔáʔhi·kwhA *go off and defecate!*

ʔáʔhI, ʔáʔhinI? *I have dirtied myself.*

ʔanáˑ, ʔanóˑ *it hurts!* (pointing to place); *sore place, cut; command to child to get away from thing or place where it might get hurt.*

[1] The material for this paper was gathered on a field trip sponsored by Columbia University to the Comanche Indians living near Indiahoma, Oklahoma during the summer of 1940.

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?asɨ·, ?a?sɨ· *rectum; feces, defecation; anything nasty.*

?eroró·?, ?eró·?, ?etó·? *white man* [tɨ́ivo·? *white man*].

?ɨtɨ́·?, ?ɨtɨ̄tɨtɨ́·? *it's hot!* (command to stay away); *fire, lamp, lightning, sun, flashlight, firewood; anything that will burn* [?ɨrɨ́·?, ?ɨrɨ̄rɨrɨ́·?].

?ɨ·kéta? *don't; let me alone.*

?ɨ́· exclamation of surprise (women or babies).

hɨ́·, hɨ̄·kéta? as above; also used by adults; *don't* (scared).

?icɨ́·?, ?icicicɨ́·? *cover me, dress me, I'm cold; it's cold; command to stay away from something cold.* [?icɨ́· used only as an exclamation].

?inɨ́·? *insect; any small noxious animal, to babies when one wants child to be afraid of something or leave it alone; bug, snake, scorpion, ant, person;* exclamation of fright. [?ɨnɨ̄·].

?ú?tU *give it to me!* [?ú·tU].

?um·á? *good! nice! beautiful;* said by mother when she wants to comb child's hair, dress it; said to attract child's attention to clothes, toy; *anything bright or colorful that attracts the child: red, yellow, blue.*

?umó·?, mó·? *cattle, cow, bull* [onomatopoeia].

papá·? *I want a drink;* water [pá· *water*].

papó·?, popó·? *dog.*

pepé·? *ball* (it was said by one informant that this word was used only by girls as boys didn't play with balls) [na? sihpé·?].

pikɨ́·? *pig* [English; pig, piggy].

tatá·? *something to eat, especially meat; I want, give me . . . ; eat!* [tɨ̄·kap *food, meat*].

tató·? *shoes, moccasins* [ta· prefix meaning *foot:* tàhtokó·? *toe*].

tá?si *vagina* (tá?sip to baby when bouncing it on the knees. A personal name: *one who has a vagina*) [tá?I].

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192 **tutú·ʔ** *automobile, train, anything that whistles* [onomatopoeia].

195 **kaká·ʔ, kaká** *bird; head louse.*

**kanî·ʔ** *house, tipi* [ˈkánhI].

**kokó·ʔ** *fruit, candy, cookies; any snack between meals;* give me. . . .

**cikî·ʔ** *chicken* [English].

**cicî·ʔ** *breast, bottle, milk, I want to be suckled!* [pîcip *milk, breast*].

**cíʔci·ʔ, pîci·ʔ** mother to child when she is going to nurse it.

**mamá·ʔ** *horse;* said by child when it wants to be carried on someone's back.

**mamá·ʔ** *mother* [English].

**mukî·ʔ, mu·kî·ʔ** *giant, owl, bogey* (to scare child) [related to mú·pic, the legendary *giant owl*].

**mumú·ʔ** used to scare child; child's exclamation of fright; *the dark, thunder; cow.*

**naná·ʔ** *it might hurt, get away; blood, sore, hurt;* said if baby doesn't feel well; if it is bitten or hurt by another child [see ʔaná·].

**nînî·ʔ** *doll; baby; little ones of animals; little. . . .*

**nînîcî·ʔ** *dear little doll, baby* [related to the pronominal prefix, nî-, *I, me*].

**waʔó·ʔ, wa·ʔó·ʔ** *cat* [adult: wáʔo·].

**ʔîʔsI, nîʔîsik** *cover me!* [adult: ʔihîkI, nîʔihîkI].

**wîʔasI** *penis* [adult: wîʔA (wîʔasiʔ male personal name *one who has a penis*)].

The sI here, and also in the baby word for *vagina,* **táʔsI,** is probably derived from the diminutive suffix, **-cI.**

### RELATIONSHIP TERMS

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195 **piá** *mother* (the regular adult word; there is no special baby word in common use).

**pipiá** said by some babies.

**ʔapî·ʔ** *father, father's brother, father's hair (friend)* [ʔápÎ address form; ʔáhpî· reference form].

**ʔatá·ʔ** *mother's brother, husband of mother's friend* [ʔárhA address form; ʔára· reference form].

**pacî·ʔ** *older sister* [pácI address form; páci· reference form].

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601 namí·? *younger sister* [námI address form; 195 námi? reference form].

taká·? *sibling* [tákA address form; **táka?** reference form].

tamí·? *younger brother* [támI address form; tami? reference form].

paví·? *older brother* [pávI address form; páví? reference form].

pahá·? *father's sister* [páhA address form; páha? reference form].

kakú·? *grandmother* [*mother's mother* is the adult meaning; kákU address form; káku? reference form].

tokó·?, totó·? *grandfather*, sometimes *father* (this form used by a younger child) [*mother's father* is the adult meaning; tókO address form; tóko? reference form].

The following terms may also be used if the child is old enough to make the distinction: kĭnú·? *father's father* [kĭnU address form; kĭnu? reference form]; hucí·? *father's mother* [húcI address form; húci? reference form].

These kinship terms, other than those used for *father*, *mother*, and *grandparents*, probably appear relatively later in the child's vocabulary. Just how far they are extended to include those relatives normally subsumed under them in adult usage is not certain, but they may be taken to apply primarily to those persons designated above or their surrogates. It is interesting to note that the maternal grandparental terms are those first [591] used for all grandparents. This suggests matrilocal residence, or at least more intimate contact with the mother's parents than with the father's.

195 In addition to the above list of formal baby words several characteristics of Comanche children's speech may be mentioned. 195 There is a tendency for children to add the diminutive-endearing suffix, -cI and the re- 193 lated -sI to words; e.g., haicí·? for haíc *friend*. Reduplication,[3] as might be inferred

[113] [3] Kroeber mentions this tendency to reduplicate in the speech of a Zuni child of 23 months whom he observed. A. L. Kroeber, The Speech of a Zuni Child, AA 18.529-34; the only published account of the speech development of a primitive child.

195 from the above list, is another feature: tĭtĭ
193 is said by little girls for tî·i, *girl friend;* pipiá for piá *mother*, etc. Although reduplication is present in Comanche as a grammatical process, it performs no ostensible grammatical function in the child's speech. Various
195 phonemic substitutions are made; p for kw
194 as pĭhI for kwĭhî *wife;* pánA for kwánA *odor, smell;* also i for ĭ as tiás for tîas, etc. One person carries the personal name, pitá·si? *one who always defecates*, a "baby name", where a p is substituted for the kw in kwĭtA *defecate!*, and the suffix -sI is also added. These substitutions are not regular, but are commonly made by children learning to speak. Somewhat more regular is the substitution of t for r (see examples in the word list).

192 Several facts become apparent upon study
195 of the above list of baby words. First, it must be recognized that these function not as
[196] single, simple words, but as whole sentences with many different, albeit related, possible meanings (exclamatory, imperative, declarative, interrogative) which are elucidated by gestures, intonations, and the context of the situation. They are really sentence-words.
195 Phonetically the baby words are simple:
194 there are no preaspirated consonants; the sonant plus h does not appear; whispered vowels and the defective phonemes, r and v, are rare and their appearance is probably late in the speech development of the child. The x phoneme and the long m are unique to the baby vocabulary.

Reduplication is evident and appears to be especially common in those words generic to the baby language and basic to it. The baby word phonetic pattern of two syllables with the second vowel accented, long, and usually ending in a glottal stop occurs in most of the examples. Words derived from the adult vocabulary are put into this pattern, as may be seen from the relationship terms. Presumably it is in this phonetic form that words are first presented to the child. This seems consistent with our practice of carefully enunciating words when teaching them to a child.

[2] Language development poses several problems for the genetic psychologist and anthropologist as well as the linguist. Some baby words are to be found in all languages, written and unwritten,[3] though not commonly as formalized and in such abundance as in Comanche. In all these baby words two facts claim attention: the universality of reduplication, and the use of simple phonemes, especially the labials p, b, m, the stops t, d, k, g, and cardinal vowels. The use of simpler phonemes is probably explained in terms of the baby's limited ability to manipulate his speech organs, since learning to speak even one's native tongue involves the induction of an intricate set of motor habits and is a maturational process comparable to acquiring such other skills as walking or skipping. But the problem of reduplication is not so easy of solution. Jespersen has this to say, "It is simpler and more natural to refer these reduplications to the pleasure always felt in repeating the same muscular action until one is tired."[4] But this seems an oversimple explanation. A natural tendency to reduplicate may perhaps be granted and seems to be supported by the oft-made observation of the infant's babbling repetition of the same sound. This proclivity seems to have been tacitly recognized by adults and conventionalized by them in reduplicated baby words.[5]

[113] [3] The following references list baby words: Wayne Dennis, The Hopi Child, 1940, p. 35; also words from Shungopavi, Zuni, and Cochiti (personal correspondence); A. F. Chamberlain, Notes on Indian Child-Language, AA, o. s., 3.237–41 (1890), 6.321–2 (1893); Edward Sapir, Nootka Baby Words, IJAL 5.118–9; Leo J. Frachtenberg, Abnormal Types of Speech in Quileute, IJAL, 1.295–9; A. L. Kroeber, op. cit.; Otto Jespersen, Language, Book II, The Child, pp. 103–88 (1923).

[4] Jespersen, op. cit., p. 109.

[113] [5] Margaret Mead, Growing Up in New Guinea, p. 36 ff., discusses the child's speech education in Manus, and mentions the endless repetition back and forth between adult and baby of the same monosyllable. She says, "This random affection for repetitiousness makes an excellent atmosphere in which the child acquires facility in speech". p. 37.

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[12] As the growth of speech facility parallels to a marked degree the maturation of the child's intellectual capacities, one might ask how comparative speech phenomena reflect this. Does it take longer for a primitive child who has to learn a highly complex language, such as many North American Indian languages, to gain control of his language than, say, a Chinese or American child?[6] At what age is the primitive child capable of making the subtle analogical formations[7] that many primitive languages require?

Some knowledge of children's speech development and baby words seems essential for the anthropologist or psychologist interested in problems of personality development and character structure. From the vocabulary itself one can form some idea of the child's world in a given culture; what objects [863] and affects impinge upon it. Discipline and attitudes are reflected, as in Comanche where

[6] Clyde Kluckhohn, who has made extensive observations on Navaho children, feels that the Navaho child, as compared with the English-speaking child of the same age, is somewhat retarded in acquiring equal facility with his extremely difficult language.

[113] [7] See Leonard Bloomfield, Language, pp. 275 ff. (1933), and Chapter X of Edgar H. Sturtevant, An Introduction to Linguistic Science (1947).

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[121] [863] feces, urine and the genitalia and feelings of disgust are equated, and where there are words used to frighten the child, admonish it, and control its movements. It seems likely that conscious speech training might be correlated with later educational procedures and attitudes towards children. This seems [858] [171] true for the Comanche where the position of children was high as was general on the Plains. It also seems important to know how long baby words are used and, if they are reverted to later in life, under what conditions.[8] The extension of kinship terms, the child's induction into their use, and the varying importance of the different relatives or classes of relatives[9] to the child are all relevant.

[8] Persistence in using baby talk was an important symptom of personality disturbance among Pilaga children where in extreme cases, those of half or full orphans, baby talk persists until the ninth year. In the most severe cases of personality disturbances a pattern of phonetic substitution is rigidly followed through and at times [113] results in serious phonetic distortion. Jules and Zunia Henry, Speech Disturbances in Pilaga Children, Am. Jr. Orthopsychiatry, 10.362-9 (1940).

[113] [9] H. Ian Hogbin, Experiments in Civilization, London, 1939: Learning-Kinship Terms, pp. 38-42, has made an admirable start in this direction.

[p. 14-B]